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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges to early childhood professionals is to effectively deal with separation anxiety and assist children in the transfer from home to other environments. This article summarizes, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the developmental stages of psychological separation, and describes techniques for practitioners for dealing with children with separation anxiety. Stages of the separation/individuation process considered include differentiation, practice of physical separation while psychological connection is retained, the state of "low-keyedness" and use of transition objects, and rapprochement. The recommended procedure and separation treatment program for children who remain in a low-key state for extended periods during the rapprochement stage advises caregivers to: (1) step in and help parents and children separate; (2) validate the feelings of both parent and child; (3) stay with the child in a close relationship; (4) help children continue the individuation process. (RH)

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Understanding and Dealing with Separation Issues in

Early Childhood Programs

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Abstract

One of the major challenges of early childhood professionals is to effectively deal with separation anxiety and assist children in the transfer from home to other environments. This article summarizes the developmental stages of psychological separation from a psychoanalytical perspective and provides techniques for the practitioner who deals daily with the cry of children who insist "I want my Mommy".

Understanding and Dealing with Separation

Issues in Your Early Childhood Program

"I want my Mommy" is a common cry, of various intensities heard in all early childhood programs. Certainly, we all miss those we love; however, the cry of children for their mothers (father) is a very distinct call out to their world. This call out to the world involves more than missing, more than wanting the familiar, more than desiring intimacy with that special someone. It is a cry of survival. Many early childhood educators have spent their mornings literally "peeling" children off their mothers to find, ironically, these same children not wanting to leave the center when Mom arrives. What is happening? Why do some children run into the center and start playing while others sit quietly staring off into space and still others cope through crying? Why then do some children cry until Mom is out of sight then start actively playing only to break down again when Mom re-enters the room? Why do some children simply refuse to look their Mom in the eye and say goodbye as their Moms persistently repeat "Give Mommy a kiss." These examples and the understanding of them lie within the realm of psychological separation. What is psychological separation?

In short, it is hatching an "I" out of a "We". Each human is born with two innate drives. One is to survive and one is to individuate or develop a unique sense of self. To survive, infants are dependent on

the ministrations of caregivers. The infant must have intervention from outside itself in order to survive. Having ones physical needs met insures survival and activates a psychological process. Physical and psychological survival is therefore equated to the "mothering person". When the infant has its needs met through healthy interactions, the total organism becomes involved. On a cellular level, a bio-chemical response occurs as an "emotional rush", on a cognitive level, the infant takes credit and responsibility that they caused the event. And finally, on a psychological level, the feelings of warmth, familiarity and pleasure are recorded. This total response of the infant is sensed as an extremely powerful and exhilarating feeling elating and radiating through their entire body. It is then recorded in memory traces as an image of "Mom", a beginning image of self and an "emotional rush". (Bailey & Brainard, 1987).

These early memory traces of "WE", therefore, consist of three components:

1. The child's initiating behaviors (i.e. crying);
 2. The "mothering person" responding (i.e. picking up the child);
 3. An emotional rush that all will be well and survival is insured.
- From this "WE" position, the child senses that he/she can trust. This beginning sense of trust develops in two ways. The first development occurs as the child begins to trust that the environment will respond to his or her need. The other occurs as the child develops trust in

* Mom is used generically representing the mothering person and does not refer to a specific gender.

oneself to initiate the behaviors that will elicit a response from her or his environment.

Once a child has established intimacy and formed this "WE" with a reliable adult(s), the need to explore and function as an independent separate self is given full expression. You can see this happen with young children at home or in an early childhood center. When children feel safe, they move away to explore, but as soon as a stranger or some other event threatens that safety, the children hurry back to the "mothering person's" knee, the base of their intimacy and safety. Once safety through intimacy is re-established, the children go bravely out in the world again. Out of a "WE" we hatch an "I" -- this is the separation process.

STAGES OF THE SEPARATION PROCESS

The first sub-stage of the separation/individuation process as described by Mahler, Pine and Bergman (1975) is called differentiation. Differentiation is the overall process of differentiating, Mom and me (WE) from other people and other things. This occurs at approximately 6-9 months of age. At about 6 months, tentative experimentation with individuation begins. This can be observed in the behaviors of the infants as they pull at "Mother's" hair, ears, nose, reach for earrings and eyeglasses. This exploration of the "mothering person" is the beginning of differentiating the "I" out of the "WE". Before the differentiation phase, infants were mostly content to mold and cuddle with the "mothering person". Now the

infants actually push their trunks away from "Mom" to scan her or him and the environment. These are the first tentative steps toward breaking away, in a bodily sense, from the stage of dual unity with the mothering person. The children begin to compare "Mom" with not Mom in a visual scanning process (Brody & Axelrad, 1970). From this discovering process of Mom and "not Mom" arises the concept of stranger anxiety. The intensity of stranger anxiety is inversely related to the trust established in the earlier "WE" or symbiotic times. The children are now more alert and interested in their environment. Their play is with objects and self and in turn, these activities validate self, give boundaries and further enhances the development of an "I".

Overlapping the differentiation phase of separation and individuation is the second stage, called practicing (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975). The practicing phase begins when the child has sufficient movement skills to move away from the "mothering person". The goal of the practicing phase is for the child to obtain physical separation. However, the child still holds a strong psychological connection to mom. In the child's mind, "Mom and I are one". In essence, the child has the best of both worlds. She/he explores the world with a growing sense of "I" -- I can do things, I can cause effect on the world while at the same time holding an image of "WE" in the head. This psychological oneness with the Mom couples with the anatomical separation is a very joyous time. The child is elated in its movement and discoveries and shows pleasure in mastery (Hendrick, 1951). This elation is sometimes not shared by the "mothering

person". Some mothers fell that they are no longer important in the life of their child and miss the closeness of earlier times. Some mothers are relieved that the child is becoming more independent but frustrated on how to set limits on the child's behaviors. There frustration, expressed as "My child is into everything", is sometimes overwhelming. Actually, the "mothering person" is essential during the practice phase as a "home base". The child constantly, visually and physically, checks back with the mother. This "refueling" is essential for the child to continue their process of pulling the "I" out of the "WE".

Low-keyedness and transition objects

During the practicing sub-phase of individuation, the child develops an intimacy with his or her own movements and the mastery skills required of his/her environment. Major periods of exhilaration with oneself are evident. However, when the child becomes aware that his/her "mothering person" is absent from the room, she/he sometimes exhibits a state of being termed low-keyedness. A low-keyed child redirects his/her focus from discovering the world of movement and objects to focusing inward on the image of Mom that they hold in their head (Rubintine, 1961). Another way to elicit the "Mom image" and the concurrent emotional rush of safety is to transfer the essence of the image of "Mom" to an object. These objects range from blankets to animals to thumbs and are termed transition objects. These transition objects and low-keyedness, both function to evoke the image of "Mom and child" in the head -- reassuring the "WE" and comforting the child that survival is insured.

This special "state of self" called low-keyedness can be seen in a young child when:

1. The child is staring off into space; yet you sense them focusing inward, possibly appearing withdrawn. These children are concentrating intently on holding the "WE" image. This is common when children are first dropped off in child care programs. They don't cry nor do they play. They also do not look their leaving parent in the eye or say goodbye. They enter the program and immediately begin concentrating on "WE" in the head.
2. Transition objects are carried throughout the day.
3. Comfort to the child appears only to come from within. Outside attempts to comfort the child by other significant others seem ineffective. Sometimes when a person other than "Mom" actively tries to comfort the low-keyed child, he/she loses their emotional balance and bursts into tears.
4. They seek private spaces (i.e. under tables, in cubbies).

Understanding and allowing for low-keyed behaviors, transition objects and private spaces is essential in early childhood programs. Supporting such behaviors nourishes the developing "I" by allowing the child to meet its own needs in a very special and private manner. However, children who spend the entire day in a low-keyed state only to come alive when Mom or Dad returns, need special assistance. A separation treatment program must be put into effect. (See separation treatment program below).

With the acquisition of locomotion and the closely following attainment of what Piaget (1936) termed representational intelligence (which culminates in symbolic play and speech), the toddler merges as a separate and autonomous person. This subphase of separation individuation is called Rapprochement (Mahler et al, 1975). This is the time when the child begins to realize for the first time in its life, s/he is a distinctly separate human being. The "I" has separated from the "WE". On the one hand, the toddler is delighted but on the other hand, the toddler realizes his/her helplessness and dependency on adults. This frightens and enrages the toddler. The toddler is torn between two strong innate desires. One desire is to be a separate self -- an I -- the other desire is to be close, safe and intimate -- a WE. The struggle between these two desires comprises the human dilemma. The dilemma is how can we be close without losing our identity and yet, at the same time, how can we be separate without being alone. This is one of the most difficult times in the human life span. No wonder the term "Terrible Twos" has been applied. The resolution of this dilemma, how to be close yet separate, or how to maintain both an "I" and a "WE" will affect us the rest of our lives as we continue to seek intimacy and separateness in our adult relationships.

During rapprochement, two major emotions arise for the toddler. One is fear manifested in clinging behaviors. The other is anger manifested in "pushing away" behaviors. The toddler fears separating and at the same time, fears not being able to define itself. The toddler is angry for feeling compelled to separate and at the same

time, angry at the helplessness of being separate. This "catch 22" situation, in which both parent and child are entrenched, creates repeated power struggles and conflict situations. This final realization of "that I am" by the toddler is indeed an emotionally stressful time.

The major power struggles that occur are with the original symbiotic partner -- the "Mom". The toddler is struggling to cope with pulling its "I" out of a specific "WE". The other significant others in the toddler's life become very important. They help draw the child out of "we-ness" and support the "mothering person" to "let go" also. Many significant others may unjustly judge the mothering person. A common comment heard may be "I just don't have those problems with Susie" or "You need help with your parenting -- just try what I do." The point is significant others do not have the power struggles that the "mothering person" will encounter. They are not the "WE" from which the toddler is separating. Once the symbiotic unit of mother and child separate, the child moves through life with an "I". Once the child hatches its "I" out of the "WE" it only knows "that I am". From this point on, the process of discovering "who I am" begins.

SEPARATION AND CHILD CARE

Many issues of separation manifest themselves in the Child Care Center. For the purpose of this article, the focus is on the rapprochement phase. Children reach this rapprochement phase somewhere between twenty months of age and three and one half years. The child

entering rapprochement will be apparent to caregiver's in early childhood programs. For most children, the ability to leave their parents in the morning qualitatively changes.

Josh had been attending the Child Care program since he was 14 months of age. He appeared to be pleased with himself and the program. He would leave his parents at the door and run off to start playing. Josh's parents were pleased he loved his school but sometimes worried about their importance in his life. They wished he would hug them goodbye so they could go off to work knowing they were loved. Josh instead never looked back -- he jumped right into playing -- actually refusing to make eye contact with his parents as they left for work. He played hard all day, carried a blanket at times, and sometimes could be noticed to stare off in space. Somewhere close to Josh's second birthday, things seemed to change. When Josh arrived at school with his parents, he now would scream and cling to them. The parents were worried that something awful had happened to Josh at school and that was why he no longer wanted to go. The child caregiver's were worried that something traumatic had happened at home. Josh

would need assistance so his parents could leave, he cried for ten to twenty minutes each morning. Shortly after this, he went off to play. His play was aggressive and he frequently had to be restrained from hitting or biting. He continued to enjoy his blanket but nothing seemed to soothe him as it had before. Josh's parents were called in as Josh's behavior got more and more out of control. Josh was displaying separation anxiety in the Child Care Center -- a common developmental occurrence. Children vary in the intensity and time in their life which they display their separation issues in early childhood programs.

SEPARATION TREATMENT PROGRAM

What can be done in the early childhood program to assist Josh and his family? Certainly, giving Josh's parents information about the separation/individuation process is essential. It will reduce their suspicions of the Center, their worries about being adequate parents, their fears of possibly creating a monster and their misunderstanding of their child's behaviors.

As early childhood professionals, we must interact and deal with Josh and other separating children. Your program must have a

procedure for helping children separate from their parents to provide for daily consistency. The following procedure is recommended in that it is based on research and theory and works!

1. Step in and help parents and children separate. Do not wait for parents to ask for help -- they are in the middle of a very confusing struggle with their child. When it appears the emotions are escalating say: "It seems you and your son need assistance in separating this morning. I'm going to help you both. It's time for Mom to leave now." Then you may literally have to pull Josh away from his mother.

2. Validate the feelings of both the parent and the child.

Example: Sally, it must be hard to leave your child when he's so upset. You're a wonderful, loving and responsible parent. This must be difficult. Josh will be safe. See you at 5:00 o'clock. Josh, it's scary when Mom leaves. You are here with me and I will keep you safe. Your mother will be back after work.

It is important with each of the validations that you focus them appropriately. Sometimes we tend to tell the parent their child will be fine or tell the child that Mom's at work and she will be back. When you validate someone, the focus is on "their" feelings and issues, not the other persons. Parents usually are feeling guilty about being a horrible parent, not that their child isn't safe or actively playing. Down deep, they realize their child does recover and plays for the remainder of the day. The children are scared and angry. They are at a point

developmentally when they are experiencing "Psychic Aloneness" for the first time in their life. They are questioning their own survival at this new level of separation. Whether their mother is at work or the laundromat is not the primary issue. The "issue" is where they are and how safe "they" feel now.

3. Stay with Josh in a close relationship. Establish a "WE". He may be screaming, kicking, sobbing or withdrawn. Continue to validate his intentions and feelings. Example: Josh, it's scary when Mom leaves and I know you want your Mommy, but I'm here to keep you safe. It is important to realize that when the self is validated it is an emotional experience. Josh may intensify his screaming and crying when he is validated. Continue to validate the emotion expressed -- "It's okay to be sad (or angry or scared)." All too often we try to silence the children only to find them releasing their feelings in other areas (i.e. over a dispute on the swings). Allowing the child to safely express their feelings at this point upon arrival in the program will help reduce aggressive behaviors cropping up throughout the day in their play with other children. Depending on the child, they may need to stay in this "WE" relationship for quite some time. The amount of time they need in the "WE" position is directly related to how scared they are to resume their journey to establish an "I" identity. Some children may cling for twenty minutes, some may stay close for two hours, some could ask to be held for three weeks. Obviously being in this "WE" position does

not foster growth in other areas of development such as cognition. Because of this, adults sometimes fear that the children are not learning. As a result, all too often the children are thrown out of the "WE" position and left to cry. The goal is to have them begin interacting with objects and other people. However, letting them cry results in building fear within the child, a reduced trust in the work, a reduced sense of trust in oneself to initiate behaviors that elicit a response and increased anger toward life. These children may indeed begin interacting with the world, but the manner in which they interact is qualitatively different than other children who predict a safe world. They interact to vent emotions not to discover the physical and social world.

4. Begin moving children out of the "WE" position to continue their individuation process.

Usually if the children have had their feelings and intentions validated, they gradually move out into the world through their own initiations. However, there are some children who need a slight "push" of encouragement. I encourage the following procedure to be used:

Both adult and child become involved in play with some objects (i.e. blocks). The adult must initiate the behavior of playing. In extreme situations the adult may be playing while the child sits on his/her lap withdrawn from the play situation. It is important that the adult NOT elicit the child into play by constantly making requests of the child such as, "Why don't you try stacking the

blocks" or "Isn't this fun, now you do it". The request is perceived as intrusion by the child and further withdrawal is most likely to occur. Invite the child into play by focusing your own "I" energy. In other words, get involved in your own play. Your energy must not be on Josh and his playing but on you and your playing. Slowly the child will start initiating behaviors. Once initiating behaviors by the child are activated, the "I" is emerging. Continue to focus on your own play as the child gradually moves into a parallel play position with you. Once parallel play is firmly established, remove yourself from the play situation. Make sure you tell Josh you are leaving the play situation but will return shortly to insure his safety. When leaving, express yourself by saying, "Josh, I am finished playing here. I am going to get a snack ready and I will be back to see you soon and make sure you are safe." Each step in the treatment program requires one-on-one time between an adult and child. In many child care situations, this is very difficult to arrange. However, if you are working with two to three year old children, finding the staff is essential. I have used volunteers very effectively. They must be educated in regard to separation issues and trained in the four-step treatment program. Understanding and assisting children with separation is an integral part of the caregiver's role in the classroom. This role involves relating information to parents about "separation individuation" and the treatment program that will be used in your program. It also involves dealing empathetically with children in the "WE" position and slowly assisting the child into the journey for an autonomous "I"

position. This treatment of the separating child reduces their fear and anger and builds trust in the world as well as oneself.

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